

Recovering From a Laminectomy

What You Need to Know

What Is a Laminectomy?

A laminectomy is a surgical procedure in which the lamina — the back part of a vertebra that forms the "roof" over the spinal canal — is partially or fully removed. The goal is to relieve pressure on the spinal cord or nerve roots that has built up due to conditions such as spinal stenosis, a herniated disc, bone spurs, or a tumor.

It is one of the most common spinal surgeries performed in the United States and is generally considered when conservative treatments (such as physical therapy, medications, and injections) have not provided sufficient relief over time. A laminectomy may be performed at one level of the spine or at multiple levels, most often in the lumbar (lower back) region.

What Can I Expect After Surgery?

Recovery from a laminectomy varies based on the extent of the surgery, your overall health, and how much nerve compression existed before the operation. General expectations include:

In the first 1–2 weeks:

- Soreness, swelling, and bruising around the incision site
- Fatigue — your body is healing, and this is normal
- Some residual leg pain or nerve sensations — these may take weeks to months to fully resolve
- Walking is typically encouraged within 24 hours of surgery and is the best early activity
- Avoid bending, twisting, or lifting anything heavy

In weeks 3–6:

- Gradual increase in walking distance and daily activities
- Physical therapy typically begins in this window
- Continued improvement in nerve-related symptoms (tingling, numbness, weakness)

In months 2–3 and beyond:

- Progressive strengthening of the core and back muscles

- Return to most normal activities for many patients
- Full recovery can take 3 to 6 months or longer depending on the complexity of the surgery

What Symptoms Are Normal After Surgery?

It is common to experience:

- Continued or fluctuating leg pain or nerve sensations — nerves heal slowly and this is expected
- Muscle soreness as you begin to move and strengthen
- Increased pain with prolonged sitting or standing early in recovery
- Sensitivity around the incision site for several weeks

When Should I Be Concerned?

Contact your surgeon immediately if you experience:

- Signs of infection — increasing redness, warmth, drainage, or swelling at the incision site
- Fever above 101°F (38.3°C)
- Loss of bladder or bowel control — this is an emergency
- Sudden severe increase in back or leg pain
- New or worsening numbness or weakness in the legs

What Precautions Should I Follow?

Your surgeon will give you specific instructions, but general precautions typically include:

- No bending, lifting (over 5–10 lbs), or twisting until cleared by your surgeon
- No driving while taking narcotic pain medications
- Avoid soaking the incision in water (baths, pools, hot tubs) until it is fully healed
- Sleep on your back or side with a pillow between your knees to reduce spinal stress
- Report any new or unusual symptoms to your surgeon promptly

How Physical Therapy Helps

Physical therapy after a laminectomy is essential to a full and lasting recovery. Your therapist will guide you through a progressive program designed to protect the surgical site, reduce nerve irritation, restore mobility, and rebuild the core and back strength needed to support your spine long-term. Starting PT at the right time — and progressing correctly — is one of the most important factors in a successful outcome.

With dedicated physical therapy, most patients reach full functional recovery within **3 to 6 months** following surgery.

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